



WHAT IS SMART?



People like being good at lots of different things, and we often kinda define ourselves by the things we choose to focus on being good at. One person may be really good at organizing things and getting them done, another may be good at being dependable and diligent, and another may be really creative, imaginative, or artsy. Those are all good talents, but when someone walks in who's very "smart," everyone else tends to feel a little smaller, and they may try to prove that their own talents make up for the fact that they're not especially smart. "Well, I know I'm not that smart, but I'm good at what I do."

"Hey, I may not be so smart, but I'm imaginative!" For some reason, being "smart" seems of more worth than other talents and skills, and we feel insecure when we don't feel very smart.

When we're mad at people, we instinctively call them dumb, stupid, idiots, morons, etc. Being not-smart seems like a fundamental insult that undercuts a person's entire effectiveness and value as a human being. We don't usually shout "Uncreative!" at the person who cuts us off in traffic, but calling them a bonehead comes much more naturally. Likewise, we tend to be much more interested in knowing who's the smartest person alive, or the smartest person ever (tell me Einstein didn't at least cross your mind), rather than wondering who's the most organized person ever.

Now, it's exciting to think of superlatives, of who's the "best" in any category: who's the best basketball player ever, who's the best chess master of all time, who's the greatest painter or sculptor, and so on, but implicitly we tend to consider "smartest person ever" to be above and beyond all those specialized talents. Even if I don't really care about "smart" stuff like theoretical physics, even if I'm a football nut who couldn't be bothered to know much about Einstein or Stephen Hawking or whomever, I'll still feel a bit small in their shadow. Why is it that "smart" seems to be in a category above everything else, the thing we all wish we could have more of, even if we shrug that we never will? What is smart, really?

Of course there are lots of different kinds of smart, like practical smarts, street smarts, financial smarts, and on and on.

And yet if you were asked to point to the smartest person you know, wouldn't you think of the brainiac who's really good at advanced math or science, who seems like a dictionary of facts and data? (Even if that brainiac happens to be yourself?)

Wouldn't you think of test scores and academic performance, of computers and robots and sci-fi nerdiness? And don't self-styled "smart" people tend to secretly (or not so secretly) think of themselves as superior to others, regardless of the talents or skills others may possess? Smart separates man from the animals, civilization from brutality, genius from mediocrity.

We often look to smart people to tell us what to believe about science or politics or philosophy or any number of crucially important subjects, placing tremendous trust in them by living our lives according to their words. However proud we may be of our diverse abilities and gifts, smart seems to be inherently regarded as something above and beyond, one gift to rule them all.

All in the Definition

But here's the thing: so often, our implicit understanding of a subject may not match up with our conscious definition of it.

For example, unconsciously I may have a firm and rational conviction that law is good, that it provides safety and order in which lives and cultures can grow. Alright, but suppose I live in a fascist dictatorship, in which the laws of the land demand that I murder my next-door neighbor because the color of his eyes offends our national ideology. What do I do? My unconscious conviction says that law is good, and really I know that it is, but...how can it be good to obey *this* law? Oh no, moral dilemma!

Or maybe it's not such a dilemma. Maybe it just comes down to a confusion about definitions, as most moral issues tend to do. What is my definition of "law?" Is "law" simply whatever the current local government decides, including murdering my neighbor? Is there something higher than the laws of men, or is that idea just fanciful rubbish? Why is constitutional law often implicitly viewed as being better than the laws of a tyrant's whim? Well, my definition of law was actually implied in my unconscious understanding of it. Unconsciously, I know law is good because it brings safety, order, and peace to human society, so that lives and cultures and economies and nations can flourish and grow. And there's my rough definition: Law is rules and order *that cause cultures and lives to flourish and grow*. When laws fulfill this unconscious definition, we call them "good laws," even if we don't realize that's why we're calling them that. And when laws cause detriment, death, and degeneration, we call them "bad laws," because they violate our unconscious definition.

I may turn on the TV in my fascist country, and see the great leaders of our noble Fatherland proclaiming that our laws are good, because if we don't murder people with the wrong color of eyes, then chaos and disorder will rule the land! See, without realizing it, they're appealing to the definition of law to try to defend their barbarous laws; they're trying to say that their laws are good because they'll bring "order" and "peace," when in reality they'll bring oppression and fear.

Once I'm aware of the definition, then I can separate real laws, the things that satisfy the definition, from the shams that aren't laws at all. Even in more civilized nations, people like Gandhi or Rosa Parks broke the official laws of their land, so that makes them criminals! Right? But we view them as heroes because they followed our hidden definition of what law really is. Now, I'm not wanting to launch into a discussion here about the nature of law and civil disobedience and all that. I just wanted to use law as one example of how it's all in the definition.

I had a good friend once who loved to see how much he could use "logic" to come to ridiculous conclusions, proving for example that Darth Vader was in fact good and noble while the noble Rebels were criminals and terrorists. He'd love to see people's faces when they'd try to find holes in his ironclad arguments. They'd know he was wrong, but they just couldn't see how! He thought it was hilarious. But without even realizing it, he was toying with definitions. By subtly changing the definitions of "order," "criminal," "terrorist," etc, to conflict with our unconscious, unworded definitions, he could then proceed to use flawless logic to prove absurd things.

Built on a foundation of false definitions, pure logic will proceed to reach false conclusions.

We tend to get very involved in all the intricacies of logical arguments, but we rarely ever look down at the foundation and delve into the definitions of the ideas we're trying to prove. A subtle twisting of definitions, often for unintentional and emotional reasons, causes arguments over hot topics like religion or politics to go on forever with no end in sight.

But more on all that later. In terms of what it means to be smart, perhaps our conscious definitions of smart, which conjure up images of math and computers and stereotypical nerdiness, conflict with the implicit, unconscious definition that we're all aware of, but which we may have trouble putting into words. Maybe if we untangled the actual, unspoken definition of smart from all the cultural ideas about it, we wouldn't slightly resent smart people, we wouldn't lord it over others when we felt smart ourselves, and we might find that most of us are actually a whole lot smarter than we ever knew.

Defining Smart

Alright, so then what is smart? When I was in seventh grade, I loved excelling in school. And that means I was smart! Or maybe not. By some cultural definitions, getting good grades equals smart, but something about that seems incomplete,

even misleading. My friends at least seemed to think so. One day at lunch, a few of them launched into a lecture against me, taking me by surprise, telling me that while I had lots of “book smarts,” I didn’t have any “street smarts,” which they had. Therefore, they said, they were just as smart as me, but in different ways. I took issue with this, not because I didn’t think my friends were smart, but because I couldn’t see how they could say I had no street smarts. Why couldn’t someone have both?

But my friends were unknowingly voicing their unconscious definition of smart. They knew that book smarts weren’t everything; we all know that. And so they tried to put that into words, declaring that now there were two types of smart: book smarts and street smarts. Well, that’s better than just one type of smart, but see how quickly an attempt to put an unspoken definition into words ends up mutilating it? It can be done, but it’s not so easy as my friends’ lunchtime attempt. Also implied in my friends’ lecture was that their two new types of smart were mutually exclusive; if you have one, then you must not have the other. Why did they declare that I had no street smarts? Well, because I was book smart! And really, why did they declare that they had street smarts? Simply because they did not have book smarts, which therefore meant they must have street smarts! Experience showed them that book-smart kids generally were a bit in their own heads, not street-smart at all, and so they decided that the two could not coexist. They got off track when they tried to put their definition into words, nevertheless they showed a strong awareness that something was not right with their culturally accepted definition of smart. Book smarts weren’t everything. But then what is smart?

Later, in high school, the eternal nerds-vs-jocks competition started to get on my nerves for this very reason. Where I lived, the self-styled “nerds” were very proud of themselves for being so smart, and they looked down their pimplly noses at all the other kids. The so-called “jocks” weren’t bullies at my school, at least not that I saw; they were too busy doing their own thing, goofing around and causing drama competing with each other, but not competing with the nerds. The nerds pitted themselves resentfully against the jocks, but the jocks didn’t seem aware that they were supposed to be at odds with the nerds.

The sheer egotism of the nerds at my school bothered me. Many of them were just mean, so petty and competitive, trying desperately to tear down everyone else in their drive to be king of the intellectual hill. Any display of academic prowess invited a campaign of passive-aggressive jabs from these insecure nerds. What struck me as particularly strange, though, was their implied assertion that they were smart simply because they were nerds. Because they were not socially or athletically inclined, they decided that therefore they must be smart, regardless of any academic performance. It was a definition of “smart” based entirely on enmity.

Getting tired of this, I’d sometimes grumble, “If nerds were actually smart, wouldn’t they realize it’s not smart to be a nerd?” Meaning, it did not strike me as intelligent to be so one-dimensional, so passive-aggressive, so neglectful of all the variety life had to offer, due to a cripplingly insecure sense of competitiveness. I was voicing an implicit definition of smart, pointing out that these self-declared nerds did not fit the real, unworded definition. I loved math and science, I loved excelling and seeing how high I could score on tests and how high of a grade I could get in classes, but all that seemed to me to be mere learned skill, a talent I’d acquired due to focus. The jocks had focused on learning athletic skills, while I couldn’t score a basket if my life depended on it, and I viewed that as equal with my learned skill of excelling academically. It was just a skill; smart, to me, was something more than that, an underlying intelligence that enabled and fueled the acquisition of all skills.

This sense of irritation grew, especially as I sought to diversify my interests while trying to deflect competitive sniping from nerds. Then one day in my senior year, our English teacher assigned an essay in which we had to define a word of our choice. With vindictive glee, I immediately decided to define smart. I was sick of this. I was sick of the nerds lording it over everyone else due to their backward definition of a word that had come to mean a lot to me. Everyone seemed to know that smart was really something above simple talent or skill, and yet the nerds enforced a cultural definition that portrayed smart as nothing more than a narrow set of nerdish skills. By their definition, they were outright better than everyone else, and most other people seemed to meekly accept that while still defending the validity of their own particular skills. So to retaliate, I was going to write an essay! That would show them! I’d show them all!

After the teacher graded our essays, she asked me if she could read mine in front of the class. No kidding, I was *that* kid. But how could I refuse? Eyeing the especially aggressive nerd who sat to my left, I agreed. She read aloud my suggested potential definitions for smart, none of which fit for various reasons which I explained. I suggested that smart could perhaps

be the typical calculator-wielding nerd, full of facts like an encyclopedia, but then explained that we don't consider encyclopedias to be genuinely smart; they're just books. I slowly approached the meaning of smart from different angles, finally declaring that smart was, in the words I chose at the time, "the ability to do whatever's best in any given situation."

Someone who was smart at basketball would have the ability to do what was best in that situation: skillfully shooting the ball, positioning their feet, avoiding opponents, and getting across the court quickly. Someone who was smart in math would have the ability to do what was best in that situation: following mathematical patterns to discover theorems or correctly solve equations. Someone who was smart at taking tests would have the ability to do what was best in that situation: remembering facts and keeping them sorted in their head. In social situations, or tactical situations, or mechanical situations, "smart" would apply differently, always denoting the raw ability to do whatever might be best in each situation.

This, therefore, showed why it was such a big deal to be smart. The teacher read my explanation of how this real kind of intelligence was the key to making life work, the key to success in anything. A person who was genuinely "smarter" would be able to find, to discern, to discover whatever was actually best, in any given situation, of any kind, any time. A moderate degree of smartness could be concentrated into any narrow focus, in order to excel in doing what was best in that narrow set of skills while neglecting the ability to do what was best in anything else. But while the nerds vaunted themselves by pretending that their particular chosen focus was above everyone else's, they were simply applying moderate smartness to a single focus in order to make it look bigger. True smart, by contrast, was the raw ability to know and do whatever was truly best, in any situation, wherever it might be applied.

I'm embarrassed to say that the class loved it. Well, all except for the nerd beside me. When the teacher finished reading, one of the "class clowns" loudly declared, "Wow, he must be really...smart!" That meant a lot to me, hence my embarrassment. But it clearly meant a lot to most of them, too; it gave them permission to acknowledge their own intelligence, defying the teenage oppression of the nerds' intellectual tyranny. It didn't put them into little holes, saying, "Well, you can be book smart, and you can be street smart, and you can be social, and you can be athletic..." but rather said that they were free to be simply smart, as much as any nerd, and could be free to develop that and apply it where they wanted to, without having to feel dumb if they chose not to apply it to typically nerdish focuses. Smart was a raw and universal ability, not any particular set of focused skills of any kind.

In the next section, we'll talk briefly about how to measure intelligence, without falling to the typical limitations of measuring only skill or aptitude. True intelligence is not fixed. It can be gained, it can be cultivated and improved, but that's a little hard to do when we don't know what it is we're trying to improve!